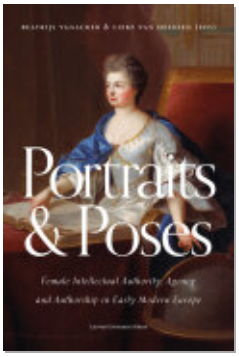
Portraits and Poses



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CHAPTER 5

(Self-)Portrait of the Woman as (a Reluctant?) Authority

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To look at ways in which women represent themselves or are represented, voluntarily or not, as authorities, I will centre my analysis on Katherine Read, Mary Robinson, and Louise-Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun. They are three women for whom both pictures and the written word were important. Their cases give us three different angles on the question. I will cast further light on them by alluding to several other early modern women creators.

Katherine Read (1723–1778) was an artist, who became famous in London, having trained in France and Italy. There are documents pertaining in particular to her earlier years, when she wrote from Rome to her relatives in Scotland, and letters were sent to her family by Peter Grant, her ecclesiastical chaperone. Mary Robinson (1757–1800) attracted public attention on the stage and then, briefly, as the prince of Wales's first mistress. She was also an author who penned bestselling poems and novels, and she was one of the most frequently represented women of her time, both in paintings celebrating her beauty and in caricatures mocking her attitudes. Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755–1842), the best known of the three, gained celebrity as a fashionable portrait painter, particularly of Marie-Antoinette, but she also wrote memoirs in the latter part of her life (*Souvenirs*, 1835–1837). All three women knew times of great success as well as periods of misfortune. Vigée-Lebrun left Paris and was in exile during the Revolution; Mary Robinson spent time with her husband in prison as a young mother, resided in France for part of her declining years, and finished her life in a small cottage very different from some of the princely dwellings she had frequented. Having been one of the most renowned portrait painters in London, Katherine Read saw her celebrity wane and she went to India. Her attempt to give her career new impetus did not pay off, and the climate did not suit her. She died on a ship between Nagapattinam and the Cape.

I am going to look at impossibilities – cases in which women are denied access to authority or agency –, at the adoption of male attitudes as a means to stand out, but also at the ways in which women by making specific choices attained forms of empowerment, for instance, by creating their own networks.

What Women Could Not Do

Many strategies for female authority are based on respecting a form of glass ceiling. They are the result of renouncing what is impossible. To give a literary example, Aimée Steck-Guichelin (1776–1821), who published several translations anonymously, refused her friends' suggestion that she should publish her poetry, seeing that as a form of indecent exposure, saying that it would be like walking down the street in her underwear.[1] The public gaze afforded on her intimacy, which would result from publishing her verse, led her to such a conclusion and the consequent refusal to publish.

Scottish artist Katherine Read at once managed to negotiate with constraints and found some she could not overcome. Born into a well-connected family with Jacobite sympathies, she took the opportunity, when the Stuarts were defeated in the middle of the eighteenth century, to leave Scotland. Though a single woman, she went first, in 1746, to Paris, where she studied painting with La Tour, and then, when Charles Edward Stuart was expelled from France after the treaty of Utrecht, she followed the Jacobite diaspora to Italy, thereby realising what she describes as every artist's dream, with 'the necessity there is for staying a time in Italy'.[2]

In Rome, Read describes what she undergoes because she is a woman:

> I cannot help looking on myself as a creature in a very odd situation; 'tis true we are all but strangers and pilgrims in this world, and I ought not to think myself more so than others, but my unlucky sex leys me under inconveniences which cause these reflections.[3]

A letter to her brother, dated June 16, 1751, complains of budgetary constraints: 'I am obliged to board, otherwise I could live at a third of the expense; this you may believe is no small vexation'.[4] The artist cannot have a snack in the street or frequent taverns, because that would be unseemly. The consequences were financial for her but also resulted in the loss of a certain camaraderie.

There are places other than hostelries where women could not go. In Naples, in April 1753, Read was unable to see the Carthusians' collections[5]: 'as these superstitious Biggotts won't allow a female creature to enter their doors, I am deprived of the pleasure I should have had'.[6] For someone like Read, looking at paintings constituted an integral aspect of her development, part of training one's eye as an artist. Indeed, many serious professional consequences resulted

from her not being a man. While she was in Italy, Lord Charlemont, one of her clients, pushed for the opening of a British Academy in Rome. It was inaugurated on May 11, 1752 but the young woman could, of course, not attend the classes, because they were taken in common. She could not work as an apprentice to a leading painter: it would have been considered improper for her to spend her time in the workshop. She could not even set up an easel outdoors where anyone might come up to her. Peter Grant, her chaperone, comments on the limitations placed upon her in a letter to her family:

> was it not for the restrictions her sex obliges her to be under, I dare safely say, she would shine wonderfully in history painting too, but [...] it is impossible for her to attend publick academies or even design or draw from Nature.[7]

This is a clear indication of the way in which, to gain any kind of visibility, women often had to renounce certain areas of learning or professional practice – like the prestigious genre of allegorical history painting – to be given some form of access to publicity.[8]

Many women who were to become famous as intellectuals or artists had to take lessons on the sly and received much less in the way of formal education than their brothers or were self-taught. Victoire Babois (1760–1839), the author of *Élégies maternelles* ('Maternal Elegies') (1805) on the death of her only daughter, explains in her preface that she started to write for herself – a typical posture to avoid looking like a bluestocking, though there is no particular reason to doubt her sincerity – and that she only discovered by chance that she was composing verse.[9] A similar thing could not have happened to a boy, who would have been taught to write poetry at school.

Another concern that had different implications according to one's gender is that of signing works of art or literature. Naming was always a problem for women in the early modern era – and beyond. I can think of authors whom I spent a long time reading, for instance for their poems scattered in almanacs, before realising that they were one and the same person publishing before and after marriage. Many major writers did not sign their works – Françoise de Graffigny (1695–1758) even sent a male friend to negotiate the sale of her first manuscript, *Les Lettres d'une Péruvienne* ('Peruvian Letters') (1747), because she knew he would get a better price than she would. Paradoxically, female agency in cases like this meant avoiding admitting one's sex. Katherine Read was having none of this. She wanted to succeed as an artist and was clear that she needed a reputation: 'I have staid one year in Rome for Improvement, I must certainly stay in it another for Name, and then you'll see I'll top it with the best of them'.[10] There is a visible strategy at work here, as there was with her relying on orders from prince Viana or cardinal Albani, two eminent Romans.[11] She clearly saw herself as an artist first, not as a woman.

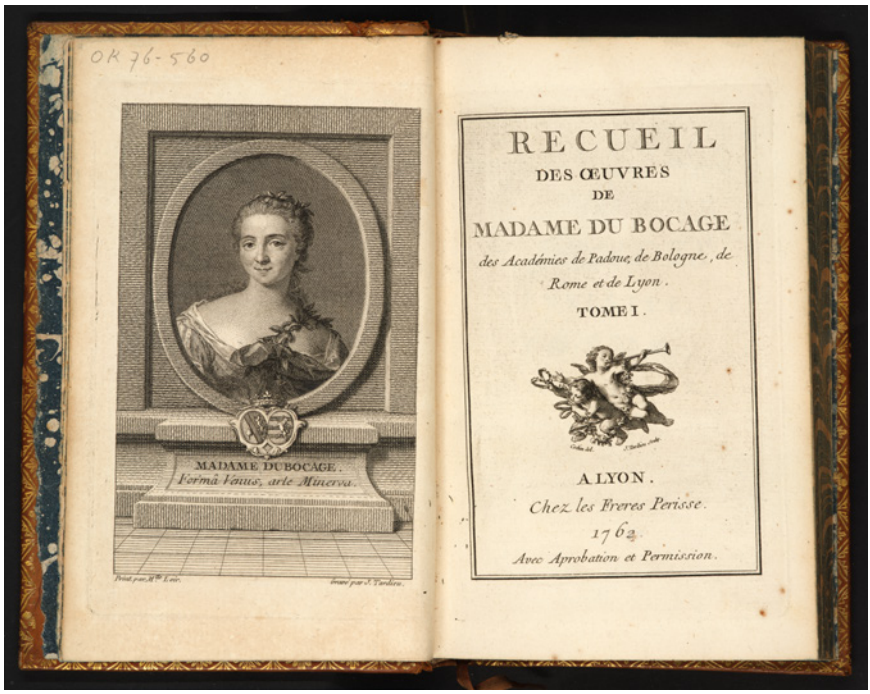

Fig. 1. *Title Page for Anne-Marie Du Bocage's Recueil des oeuvres* (Lyon, les frères Perisse, 1764). © Museum Allard Pierson Amsterdam.

Connections and Networks

Though she could not train like a man or paint certain things, Read created a world for herself from within, using her connections – private rather than public networks. In the same way as the artistic trainees of the Académie de France in Rome, she copied masterpieces like the Stuarts' Van Dycks, cardinal Albani's Carlo Dolces and Rosalba Carrieras, which she was allowed to borrow.[12] She was serious about succeeding, as she writes, from Rome, to her brother Alexander: 'I apply so constantly and take every decent method of improvement that I think it must be impossible I can miss'.[13]

Read used the scattering of the Jacobites as a means to her personal end of training as an artist, going first to Paris, then to Rome, which was unheard of for an unmarried woman born, as she was, into a well-connected family – she even managed a trip to Venice to meet Rosalba Carriera, whose pastels had been mentioned admiringly to her.[14] Not being able to train in an academy or workshop did not mean not having good masters – and the Jacobite diaspora and sympathisers seem to have played a part. Read apparently had lessons with La Tour in Paris[15] and subsequently, in Rome, with another Frenchman,

Louis-Gabriel Blanchet, who was then a famous artist too.[16] Both La Tour and Blanchet portrayed the Stuart princes. She also used her genteel upbringing and connections as a means to acquire patrons and clients. Part of this reliance on a network was completely independent of her gender and typical of what a male artist would have done.

Public exhibitions and being a member of academies were ways in which women painters and writers sought to show that they could be judged on the same terms as any other artist. Anne-Marie Du Bocage (1710–1802) indicates on the title page of her books that she is a member of the French Academies at Padua, Rome, Bologna, and Lyon. This constitutes a form of guarantee for the reader, particularly as the multiple names have a cumulative effect (Fig. 1).[17] Of course, many learned societies would not let women in or would only let them in on unequal terms.

Among painters, Rosalba Carriera (1673–1757) was exceptional in many ways: her talents were sufficient to earn a living for herself and to maintain the rest of her family – including her brother-in-law, himself no mean artist. She also gained professional recognition by being appointed a member of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. The minutes of the Académie reveal that this was not the sign of a new norm, but rather a case that was clearly intended to remain exceptional: the decision was not to constitute a precedent according to the minutes.[18]

Fig. 2. Johan Joseph Zoffany, *The Academicians of the Royal Academy* (1771–1772). Oil on canvas. © Royal Collections Trust. Public domain. (Plate 20, p. 368)

Whilst Vigée-Lebrun was made one of the four women fellows (the maximum number at the time) of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, Read was not one of the two exceptional women, Mary Moser (a renowned painter of flowers) and Angelica Kauffman, who in 1768 became members of the Royal Academy. Instead, with Mary Black and Mary Benwell, in 1769, Read became an honorary member of the Society of Artists. In the same way as in the portrait of the founding members of the Royal Academy, Moser and Kauffman are only present as pictures (Fig. 2), Read was just an 'honorary' member: both are clear indications that institutional equality did not extend beyond certain gestures. Women sought legitimacy by competing in areas in which they were not defined by their gender – for instance in academic competitions where one's identity was initially hidden – and attempted to overcome boundaries, sometimes unsuccessfully, as when Marie Leprince de Beaumont (1711–1776) wrote to the Academy in her birthplace, Rouen, to ask to be admitted on the strength of her pedagogical works. These were apparently not sufficient for the learned gentlemen who made up the association to bend the rules for her, and she was to remain outside whilst less distinguished members of the male sex were welcomed. In writing her request to be admitted, Leprince de Beaumont was seeking recognition in a male arena. Society was clearly not ready for true equality and often, to succeed, women had to adopt masculine references.

Fig. 3. Élisabeth Louise Vigée-Lebrun, *Self-Portrait with a Straw Hat* (1782, signed copy after a popular self-portrait she painted the same year). Oil on canvas. © National Gallery, London. Public domain. (Plate 21, p. 369)

Use of masculine references is habitual and can be seen as a way of giving weight and legitimacy to the productions of female artists and authors. When Read represented herself, for a painting currently in a private collection, she chose the mocking Democritus-like posture of La Tour in his self-portrait – which another woman painter, Suzanne Roslin (1734–1772), later referenced. Read has her finger in evidence, the one she uses for her art, and is pointing beyond what we can see. Roslin painted La Tour's picture and her picture of La Tour's self-portrait, as well as herself. Both artists are using a recognisable model for their own ends.[19]

Vigée-Lebrun went one step further when she took a different male painter as her inspiration for a 1782 self-portrait: Rubens (Fig. 3). She used his portrait of a woman and, in a sense, subverted it by transforming it into the self-portrait of a woman artist. She is thus rivalling a renowned master. She speaks of having discovered the picture on a trip to Flanders with her husband and having been bowled over by Rubens's use of light.

> This painting enchanted me and inspired me to the extent that I painted my portrait in Brussels and sought the same effect. I painted myself wearing a straw hat, a feather and a garland of wild flowers on my head and holding my palette in my hand. When the portrait was exhibited at the Salon I can fairly say that it did a lot for my reputation. The celebrated Muller engraved it [...]. Shortly after my return from Flanders, in 1783, the portrait of which I have just spoken and several other works convinced Joseph Vernet to put me forward as a member of the Académie royale de peinture.[20]

The picture led another male artist, Joseph Vernet, to offer Vigée-Lebrun academic legitimacy, or so we are led to believe. This affirmation was no doubt intended to counter the rumour that she had only been accepted by the Académie Royale at Marie-Antoinette's indirect request. Using the traditions of the male specialist, women artists often depicted themselves with the tools of their trade. An obvious example is that of pastellist Rosalba Carriera (Fig. 4). She painted herself because that was the cheapest way to get a model and to showcase one's talents for potential clients. She also depicted herself as an artist, in particular, when young, holding a portrait of her sister that she had painted and on which she appears to be putting the finishing touches. A customer who saw the picture thus got to see the artist and her art all in one – an ideal advertisement.[21]

Many other painters did this throughout the early modern period, but Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun is possibly the most interesting case because of the number of self-portraits she painted of herself *as an artist*. Beyond the one in which she is staring out at the viewer, palette in hand (Fig. 3), as though interrupted during a working session, others show her at her easel, depicting the queen of France – an excellent piece of publicity, because it serves to say that

Fig. 4. Rosalba Carriera, *Self-portrait Holding a Portrait of Her Sister* (1709). Pastel. © Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Public domain. (Plate 22, p. 370)

Fig. 5. Élisabeth Louise Vigée-Lebrun, *Self-Portrait* (1790). Oil on canvas. © Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Public domain. (Plate 23, p. 371)

she is a court painter and that, by using her, one can hope to access some of the glory and panache of the French monarchy. She subsequently kept the same pose but represented herself portraying a Russian aristocrat during her stay in Russia. Vigée-Lebrun often offered a self-portrait, when required to donate a sample of her work. This clearly served as a double advertisement, one which promoted her image and her talent in one simple action.

One of the risks incurred by women using masculine references or accomplishing actions seen as male is their condemnation by male authorities as indecent. Let me just take one example to stand for all. Writer Constance Pipelet (1767–1845) read one of her works in public at the Lycée in Paris in 1801. Conservative journalist Peltier commented in his periodical *Paris*:

> May we be allowed to say, for there is some parity between these deviations: women who dare to say all, to reveal all in their novels, to expose all in their verse, seem to us to have reached the same limit as those who, having removed all their clothes one by one only retain the slightest piece of cloth. One can then without a doubt be permitted to scream out loud.[22]

One of the failures of women positioning themselves as experts is that, too often, they were seen as being assisted by men. '*Elle a son teinturier*', or she has someone who actually writes for her (a 'ghostwriter' to use contemporary

vocabulary), Constance Pipelet reminds us, is too often an accusation levelled at successful literary women.[23] Unsigned texts or pictures were directly attributed to men. For example, Katherine Read's art is sometimes ascribed to other male artists – in particular Reynolds[24] – or even imaginary painters as in the catalogue drawn up by Frenzel, curator of the king of Saxony's engravings and drawings. Frenzel, reading the initial 'C' in '*C. Read, pinxit*', preferred to invent a Charles Read without an oeuvre rather than rendering unto Caesar, or rather Catherine (or Katherine, both spellings are used) Read, what is rightfully hers.[25]

Women's Choices

Forms of emancipation are sometimes created through specific choices that show women respecting strictures but also using them to their own advantage. To avoid criticism, many of them chose the genres in which they wrote or painted in order not to shock their contemporaries, for instance, by keeping diaries rather than submitting their literary works for publication. In many ways, women's attempts at empowerment can be seen as a case of *damned if you do, damned if you don't*. When they stuck to more 'feminine' genres, they were complimented dismissively, as when, in 1772, a short piece in the *Letters concerning the Present State of England* stresses how pleasant Read's art is:

> This lady's crayons are filled with grace and elegance; her expression of mildness; youthful cheerfulness; smiles and natural ease; is uncommonly beautiful; and renders her work truly pleasing. Her attitudes have great merit; and the general effect of all her pieces [is] agreeable.[26]

It is clear that she is natural and full of grace but would be condemned were she to try and break out and do anything else. That is probably why Read chose to concentrate on women and children. She created a niche for herself. From Rome, abbé Grant, who saluted her potential talent in a wide field, added this:

> she is determined to confine herself to portraits and one branch of history painting which consists of single figures, and for this she seems to have a very happy turn [...] the strong byass of genius she has for this sort of painting in doing of Angels, Saints, Magdalens, Cleopatras, etc., would fain make her continue here at least till the end of next summer.[27]

Other women, too, chose to shape existing genres to their ends, often by stressing the female side of their approach.

Not only did she have a knack for portraits, Katherine Read was particularly good at one technique, the crayon or pastel:

> I have lately painted several heads in crayons merely to try experiments and occupy fancy. I have succeeded beyond my expectation, and do not despair of doing something yet before I die that may bear a comparison with Rosalba or rather La Tour, who I must own is my model among all the Portrait Painters I have yet seen.[28]

She subsequently took part in specialist discussions about how to fix pastels.[29] Her gifts were obvious, as Peter Grant wrote to Alexander Read:

> I am truly hopeful she'll equal at least if not excel the most celebrated of her profession in Great Britain, particularly in Crayons, for which she seems to have a very great talent, having done already several portraits of that kind with incomparable success.[30]

Shortly after arriving in London, Read painted Queen Charlotte and was said to have produced the first portrait of her as monarch: the 1761 *Portrait of a Lady* shown at the *Spring Gardens Exhibition*.[31] She subsequently portrayed other members of the royal family and two of the children of the French royal household. She was awarded the title of court paintress to the queen, which indicated this special tie. As a humorous piece published in the press in 1766 and signed 'Jacobina Henriques' indicates, there would be true equality between the sexes if Elizabeth Carter became poet laureate, Catharine Macaulay historiographer, and Katherine Read painter (and not paintress) to the king (rather than the queen).[32]

Vigée-Lebrun, as already mentioned, owed much of her fame to her portraits of Marie-Antoinette, and royal patronage was the key to her being made a member of the Académie Royale. Robinson, from early on, used women as patrons, relying in particular for her first work, a collection of poems, on support from the renowned society hostess and defender of the arts, Georgiana, duchess of Devonshire.

In artistic and literary terms, one of the ways in which many women struck out was in fact by creating female networks and setting out to train others, in particular other women. I noted that Read had visited Rosalba Carriera. The two artists wrote to each other, and Katherine Read expressed her surprise, in 1756, at a letter from the Italian pastellist, whom she believed to be dead. She answered – in French, then the lingua franca of cultivated society:

> I regretted you as friend and as a peerless artist who had honoured her sex more than it ever had been as I know no works comparable to yours. As far as I am concerned, I consider you as a person filled with truly beautiful and angelic inspirations and ideas.[33]

Carriera is seen as setting a new standard for all art, not just art by women, but by that very fact, rendering a particularly important service to her sex.

Read acted as a substitute mother to her niece, Helena Beatson,[34] of whom she painted several portraits and whom she encouraged in her artistic endeavours. Apparently, young Helena, a 'very wonderful girl' according to Frances Burney,[35] was particularly gifted, because there are records of her exhibiting pictures at the age of eight in 1771 and provoking the admiration of Walpole and also of Beattie.[36] At eleven, in 1775, she showed six works at the Society of Artists: *A Card Party*, *A Fortune-Teller*, *Blindman's Buff*, *Gipsies*, and two pictures of *Dancers*.

Among Read's pupils, apart from her niece, are thought to be Agneta Johnson Yorke and Mary Benwell.[37] It would have been far easier for them to be trained by another woman painter. The artist who did most to further this particular aspect of the professionalisation of women painters later in the century was no doubt Adélaïde Labille-Guiard (1749–1803). She pictured herself in a striking painting of herself at her easel with two young students looking on, which turns us into the passive model and her into the magisterial artist (Fig. 6). She also encouraged a school of young women who, once exhibiting publicly had become easier after the Revolution, showed off their self-portraits in different artistic salons.[38]

Fig. 6. Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, *Self-Portrait with Two Pupils* (1785). Oil on canvas. © Metropolitan Museum of Art. Public domain. (Plate 24, p. 372)

Another way of showcasing the importance of women was to choose female models. Multiple references to Sappho as an artistic or literary model have been studied.[39] The idea was that if you could show a female model in the area in which you wanted to excel, you could, to a certain extent, overcome the idea of exceptionality that marginalised you.

Independence

One of the ways to acquire agency also lay in distancing oneself from any dependency on a male figure, whether a father, a brother, or a husband. This was important to Vigée-Lebrun, who was initially in the shadow of her male relatives, but became famous under her double name, which referenced her father and her husband but was hers alone.[40] Like Carriera, Read never married. She was orphaned before she undertook most of her travelling. She did all she could to be financially independent from her obviously supportive brother Alexander. Robinson makes great efforts, in her autobiography, to portray herself as the youthful victim of an unscrupulous husband. Like Vigée-Lebrun, she spent much of her life away from her spouse, leading a separate existence in which she was the more important of the two.

I have used the adjective 'professional' several times. There are different ways to understand this, but in dealing with female agency, I would like to understand it in the way we do in sports nowadays, where amateurs are not paid, however talented they are, whereas professionals are. Money was a hugely important concern for early modern women. Legal dispositions meant that they often had no real access to patrimony. For a woman artist or intellectual, to use broad-ranging terms, getting paid was often an issue. It was no doubt easier for someone like Rosalba Carriera, born into a family of craftspeople, to demand payment, than for Katherine Read. The latter, however, was freer, because there were fewer financial worries in her family, yet she cared deeply about her own independence. She clearly saw earning her own income as a means of enfranchisement. She was always anxious to write to her brother about her early orders when she was in Italy: 'I have the honour to be the first from our Island that ever painted an Italian above the rank of a Priest or an Abbé, whereas I have painted the very first Princes in Rome'.[41] This is all well and good but the problem for someone of her rank is to be remunerated. When Cardinal Albani asked for a portrait of his niece, Princess Chigi, Read had to treat this as a privilege:

> the Italians despise people so much that are obliged to do anything for money that Mr Grant thought it proper to name no price when the question was ask'd […] for in this Holy City Pride and Folly prevail so much that every thing is regarded according to the degree of show it makes.[42]

Read could not even have the discussion herself: her protector abbé Grant had to undertake the negotiations.

Thanks to her art, Read received a series of gifts, which she attempted to assess in financial terms:

> I have painted two Princesses, for which they gave me by way of a present two medals that both together weigh about ten guineas. From the Marchesa Maximy [Massimo] I got a very curious casket or box of ebony, so finely ornamented with oriental stones in imitation of fruits, flowers, birds, etc., that I am told in England it will be worth forty or fifty guineas. Some people advise me to make a present of it to the Princess of Wales, but I believe I shall rather convert it into money […]. I had from a Monsignor a ring I believe of no very great value, and I expect in a few days to begin a picture of the Brother of Prince Cheserina [Cesarini] from whom I shall have perhaps some such useless Trinket.[43]

Money is converted, in the painter's words, into decorative objects, in order to cleanse it and to remove any mercantile aspect from the exchange. This is all done to save appearances and make it look as though Read is a lady of leisure who has no need of funding and is only too happy to honour her friends. It maintains a fiction of equality between artist and sitter.[44] Read was delighted when, still in Rome, she could write to her brother that she had accepted a paid commission for a portrait of Marchesa Gabrielli: 'I shall get money for it', she notes gleefully.[45]

It is perhaps a consequence of these early years in which she found it difficult to get even the going rate for her pictures, that Read, like Vigée-Lebrun, was to fix high prices for her art when she became famous. We know that, for her 1764 portraits of two French princes, the comte d'Artois and Madame Clotilde, she was paid 960 French livres.[46] In 1772, her sitters in London were charged thirty pounds for a pastel portrait. Three years later, the rate had risen to thirty guineas – and oil portraits were considerably more expnsive. Read had a successful career in financial terms. She supported her Scottish family and left large legacies in her will.

Once she had gained fame and status, Read had her own studio in London to which her sitters – even aristocratic ones – came to pose and which visitors dropped into to view her works. This clearly set her out as a professional rather than simply a talented amateur. Within a studio, the artist could set her own rules for her subjects.

Even if they did not have a room of their own, many women managed to create the equivalent of a literal or metaphorical space of their own – Read, Vigée-Lebrun, and Angelica Kauffman (1741–1807) endeavoured to do this. Robinson, too, had a clear sense of space, both in the way she inhabited it and in her conception of writing. Creating metaphorical space was often achieved by taking over postures and attitudes traditionally associated with men.

More than Stand-Alone Portraits

Read, Robinson, and Vigée-Lebrun made sure that some of the women they represented were powerful ones. Read, alongside her society portraits, including those of members of the royal family, famously depicted some of the bluestockings and their circle. Her 1763 miniature of Catharine Macaulay (1731–1791), as described in detail in the chapter by Seren Nolen in this volume, shows the great historian as a Roman matron weeping over Rome's lost liberties,[47] a political statement, as well as one that presents Macaulay as a serious scholar. Read also depicted Elizabeth Carter (1717–1806), who edited Epictetus, with a bound volume and a quill, instruments of her trade. Like Macaulay, the sitter is in what could be classical dress, ennobled by the choice, joining the ranks at once of the great figures of antiquity and of the best of modern scholars (see plate 33, p. 380). Everything seems to indicate that Macaulay and Carter might have been the initial figures of a set of contemporary women intellectuals, along with novelist Frances Brooke (1724–1789) and perhaps some others. Read may have had the intention of having the portraits engraved to provide a sort of portable gallery of women of letters.[48]

We tend to think of portraits on their own, except when for instance you have a matched pair (e.g. children of the same family or a husband and wife), but considering them in context is often useful. There is a 'serial' effect in some of Vigée-Lebrun's works, for instance, when you put her self-portrait alongside

Fig. 7. Élisabeth Louise Vigée-Lebrun, *Marie-Antoinette in a Muslin dress* (after 1783). Oil on canvas. © National Gallery of Art. Public domain. (Plate 25, p. 373)

Fig. 8. Élisabeth Louise Vigée-Lebrun, *Self-portrait with Her Daughter* (1786). Oil on canvas. © Musée du Louvre. Public domain. (Plate 26, p. 374)

those of Marie-Antoinette *en gaulle* (which created a scandal when exhibited) (Fig. 7), of Madame Élisabeth, or of the princesse de Lamballe. A few years after painting these, by choosing a Raphael Madonna as an implicit model to present her self-portrait with her daughter Julie in 1789 (Fig. 8), Vigée-Lebrun once again rivalled a great male artist. She was, however, seemingly also saying that she did not need to depict herself as an artist in the way she did in other self-portraits like the earlier Rubens-inspired one of herself in a straw hat. She is portraying herself according to the codes of sensibility and aesthetics in vogue at the time as a beautiful woman and as a devoted mother. In a way, the sentimental narrative expressed with her masterful artistic technique seems to say that she has it all. She also contradicts the premise often used to attack women painters and intellectuals, which states that they are too ugly to do anything else. In 1775, Frances Burney refers to Read in unflattering terms:

> She is absent, full of care, and has a countenance the most haggard and wretched I ever saw; added to which she dresses in a style the most strange and queer that can be conceived, and which is worse of all, is always very dirty.[49]

Other artists, like Rosalba Carriera, are routinely described as too unattractive to provoke desire in any man. Vigée-Lebrun is clearly showing that she can have her cake and eat it too: she can be a great artist but also a loving mother and an attractive woman.

Mary Robinson, in her memoirs, is also at pains to show herself not as she was when writing – handicapped after a streptococcal infection sustained when pregnant, if we are to believe Paula Byrne[50] – but as a beautiful and fashionable woman, on the one hand, and as a deep and caring individual, on the other. The coherence of the inner personality serves as a form of guarantee that all about her is accurate.

The three women seem to have used fashion as an adjunct – Read by making her portraits fashionable, Vigée-Lebrun by painting fashionable women and Robinson by instrumentalising fashion to stand out from the crowd. They thus used a consciousness of the changeability of taste and the way it could be marketed to attain what they knew was, at least in part, a form of success which might not be eternal. When Read was established in London, news of her fame gladdened the heart of her friend Peter Grant in Rome: 'It was given to me to understand that she is already come into such great repute that all the fine Ladys have made it to be as much the fashion to sit to my friend Miss Read as to take the air in the Park'.[51] One of the ways of being fashionable for all three women was to use other women. This repurposing of the frivolous to make sense is I think a clever form of agency, a soft power of its own.

An interesting case of empowerment is that of Mary Robinson, famed from her youth as the first mistress of the prince of Wales. She was first an actress,

then a novelist and poet. A great beauty, she was also the object of numerous caricatures during her royal liaison. Towards the end of her life when she was no longer in the public eye to the same extent and she had suffered physically and had aged prematurely, she used her skill at writing, in association with her recollection of what she looked like when she was in her prime, to leave behind memoirs, meant for publication, as a record to set things straight for posterity. Not only does she depict herself as a trendsetter, a stunning young woman, she also paints a picture at odds with the usual vision of actresses: if we are to believe what she writes, she was virtuous, faithful in love, and much wronged by men.

Through her words, Mary Robinson sets herself at the centre of the scene and, like the actress she once was, stages a performance for the audience's benefit – we are that audience. As readers, we look at her with wonder through the eyes of the contemporaries of her younger self:

> A new face, a young person dressed with peculiar but simple elegance, was sure to attract attention at places of public entertainment. The first time I went to Ranelagh my habit was so singularly plain and Quaker-like that all eyes were fixed upon me. I wore a gown of light brown lustring with close round cuffs (it was then the fashion to wear long ruffles); my hair was without powder, and my head adorned with a plain round cap and a white chip hat, without any ornaments whatever.[52]

What could have been seen as frivolity – undue attention to her appearance – thus becomes an important aspect of Robinson's construction of a self-portrait. The paradoxical nature of this is hinted at in her choice to dress plainly in order to stand out compared with the overdressed women around her. There are different modulations in the way she plays on the public's expectations.

> The second place of polite entertainment to which Mr Robinson accompanied me was the Pantheon concert, then the most fashionable assemblage of the gay and the distinguished. At this place it was customary to appear much dressed; large hoops and high feathers were universally worn. My habit was composed of pale pink satin, trimmed with broad sable; my dear mother presented me a suit of rich and valuable point lace, which she had received from my father as a birthday gift, and I was at least some hours employed in decorating my person for this new sphere of fascination: I say some hours, because my shape at that period required some arrangement, owing to the visible increase of my domestic solicitudes. [...] I observed two persons, evidently men of fashion speaking, till one of them, looking towards me, with an audible voice inquired of the other, 'Who is she?'
>
> Their fixed stare disconcerted me; I rose, and, leaning on my husband's arm, again mingled in the brilliant circle. The inquiries followed us;

> stopping several friends, as we walked round the circle, and repeatedly demanding of them, 'Who is that young lady in the pink dress trimmed with sable?'[53]

Like the fashionable attendees at the Pantheon concert of yesteryear, the reader is invited to ask who the beautiful young woman in pink might be. By showing that she has thought through her attire, Robinson indicates that there

Fig. 9. Élisabeth Louise Vigée-Lebrun, *Marie-Antoinette, Queen of France, and Her Children* (1787). Oil on canvas. © Château de Versailles. Public domain. (Plate 27, p. 375)

is depth below the surface and that she knows how to manipulate the public gaze. By returning to the vision of the beauty she once was, she fixes it in our memories, even though we were not there when the scene took place. Her words, destined to be reproduced and to circulate eventually supersede the cruel caricatures that made her life a misery. The portrait of her that will live on after her death will, she clearly hoped, be closer to what she considered to be her true self. The reference to her pregnancy ties in with the codes of sensibility and helps sustain her overall narrative, which depicts her not just as a once striking teenager, but also as a caring mother, something her text does throughout, something, as we have seen, which Vigée-Lebrun strove to do through her self-portraits, but also for the long-suffering sovereign she often painted.

In her famous portrait of Marie-Antoinette and her children, Vigée-Lebrun depicts the queen in red, like a Raphael Madonna. The queen's jewellery cabinet is in the shadows. The maligned monarch is depicted as Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, showing off her children as her treasures, strong because she is the mother of the future king of France, but also because she is a woman (Fig. 9). In the group portrait, Vigée-Lebrun also arguably presents a different scene from one that a male painter of the time might have sought to show.

In the early modern period, it was not always easy to find ways to express oneself as a woman. Paradoxically, the more extreme interventions like Olympe de Gouges's *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* ('Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen') (1792) went largely unnoticed, whereas soft-touch revisions of male conventions like Vigée-Lebrun's portraits could command respect and make one famous. It was often by knowing the codes and manipulating them skilfully that Ancien Régime women could hope to make their mark. By acquiring agency in grey areas where they were tolerated, they could extend their authority. By supporting other women, they helped to normalise the idea of female talent. Empowerment was not won easily, but these gradual steps all counted: even if they did not succeed in gaining equality for women, they removed some obstacles along the way…

Notes

1. See Catriona Seth, 'Les rencontres entre Germaine de Staël et Marie-Aimée Steck-Guichelin', in *Cahiers staëliens*, '*"Corinne", 200 ans après*', 2008, 41–51.
2. A. Francis Steuart, 'Miss Katherine Read, Court Paintress', in *The Scottish Historical Review*, 1904, 2(5), 39.
3. Ibid., 40.
4. Ibid., 39.
5. Now a museum complex, the Certosa e Museo di San Martino, the Carthusian monastery was celebrated in particular for its collection of seventeenth-century Neapolitan artworks.
6. Steuart, 'Miss Katherine Read, Court Paintress', 42.
7. Ibid., 41–42. Letter dated January 11, 1753.
8. Margery Morgan's attribution to Read of a portrait of compatriots who were amateurs and antiquaries, in an outdoor scene, illustrates the artist's temptation to extend her practice: Morgan, '*British Connoisseurs in Rome*: Was it Painted by Katherine Read (1723–78)?', in *The British Art Journal*, 2006, 7(1), 40–44.
9. See Catriona Seth, 'Victoire Babois', in Christine Planté (ed.), *Femmes poètes du XIXe siècle: Une anthologie*, Lyon, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1998, 15–16.
10. Donald Richard Torrance, *The Reads of Auchenleck, Balmachie, Cairnie, Drumgeith, Logie, Montpelier, Turfbeg and in India*, Edinburgh, 1985; Samantha Howard, *A New Theatre Of Prospects: Eighteenth-Century British Portrait Painters And Artistic Mobility*, York, University of York, 2010.
11. Steuart, 'Miss Katherine Read, Court Paintress', 40.
12. Katherine Read to her brother, quoted in ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. A letter from Read, in Rome, to her brother, quoted by Torrance (*The Reads of Auchenleck*, 77) affirms: 'I have been told by several connoisseurs that I would change my opinion were I at Venice to see Rosalba's best works'.
15. Andrew Lumisden, in a letter to Robert Strange dated August 3, 1751, describes the artist as 'Miss Read from Dundee who was sometime at Paris with La Tour' (Margery Morgan, 'Jacobitism and Art after 1745: Katherine Read in Rome', in *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 2004, 27, 233). In 1751, the painter herself wrote: 'I hear my old master La Tour is in London, where I don't doubt of his getting money by his great merit and great price, not from his quantity of work, unless he leaves off that custom of rubbing out which he practised but too much, although I can scarcely blame it in him as a fault, as it proceeded from an over delicacy of Taste and not from a light headedness as was alleged, for he has no more of that about him than is natural to and becoming a French man' (Steuart, 'Miss Katherine Read, Court Paintress', 39).
16. 'I am sitting to a very famous French man, one Blanchet, for my picture, who visits me often and is my present master' (see Torrance, *The Reads of Auchenleck*, 74). The current whereabouts of Blanchet's portrait of Read are unknown.
17. The same goes for Vigée-Lebrun when her *Souvenirs* were published in 1869: the title-page describes her as 'de l'Académie royale de Paris/ de Rouen, de Saint-Luc de Rome et d'Arcadie/ de Parme et de Bologne/ de Saint-Pétersbourg, de Berlin, de Genève et Avignon'.
18. 'Academies of Art', in Delia Gaze (ed.), *Dictionary of Women Artists*, vol. 1, Chicago, Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997, 46.
19. See Melissa Hyde, '"Peinte par elle-même?", Women Artists, Teachers and Students from Anguissola to Haudebourt-Lescot', in *Arts et Savoirs*, 2016, 6.

20. 'Ce tableau me ravit et m'inspira au point que je fis mon portrait à Bruxelles en cherchant le même effet. Je me peignis portant sur la tête un chapeau de paille, une plume et une guirlande de fleurs des champs, et tenant ma palette à la main. Quand le portrait fut exposé au salon, j'ose vous dire qu'il ajouta beaucoup à ma réputation. Le célèbre Muller l'a gravé […]. Peu de temps après mon retour de Flandre, en 1783, le portrait dont je vous parle et plusieurs autres ouvrages décidèrent Joseph Vernet à me proposer comme membre de l'Académie royale de peinture' (Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Souvenirs*, vol. 1, Paris, Charpentier et Cie, 1869, 57).
21. Uffizi, inv. 1786, A 189. See Neil Jeffares, 'Carriera, Rosalba', in his online *Dictionary of Pastellists before 1800* (www.pastellists.com).
22. 'Qu'on nous permette de le dire, car il y a quelque parité entre ces *écarts:* les femmes qui osent tout dire, tout révéler dans leurs romans, tout exposer dans leurs vers, nous paraissent se placer sur la même limite que celles qui, ayant déposé l'un après l'autre tous leurs vêtements, retiennent à peine un léger tissu. Certes, il est permis alors de jeter un cri' (Jean-Gabriel Peltier, *Paris pendant l'année 1801*, vol. XXXIV, Londres, Cox, Fils et Baylis, 1801, 306).
23. See Catriona Seth, '"*L'Epître aux femmes*": textes et contextes', in *Cahiers Roucher-André Chénier*, *Constance de Salm. Varia et documents*, 2010, 29, 41–63.
24. Steuart, 'Miss Katherine Read, Court Paintress', 38.
25. J. G. A. Frenzel, *Catalogue raisonné des estampes du cabinet de feu Madame la comtesse d'Einsiedel de Reibersdorf etc*., vol. 2, Dresden, Meinhold et fils, 1833, 383.
26. Anonymous, *Letters concerning the present State of England, particularly respecting the Politics, Arts, Manners and Literature of the Times*, London, J. Almon, 1772, 257.
27. Ibid., 41–2. Letter dated January 11, 1753.
28. Steuart, 'Miss Katherine Read, Court Paintress', 40.
29. Jeffares, 'READ, Katherine', in his online *Dictionary of Pastellists before 1800*.
30. Steuart, 'Miss Katherine Read, Court Paintress', 41.
31. Morgan, '*British Connoisseurs in Rome*', 43, refers to Algernon Graves, *The Society of Artists of Great-Britain 1760–1791, The Free Society of Artists 1761–1783*, [London, George Bell and Sons, 1907] Bath, Kingsmead Reprints, 1969.
32. *The Discovery*, January 1766, 42.
33. 'Je vous regrettais comme une amie, et comme une artiste sans égale, qui avait fait plus d'honneur à son sexe qu'il n'en eut jamais été, car je ne connais point d'ouvrages comparables aux vôtres. Pour ce qui me regarde, je vous considère comme une personne remplie d'inspirations et d'idées vraiment belles et angéliques' (*Le Gallerie nazionale italiane: notizie e documenti*, 1899, IV, 156).
34. Helena Beatson, born March 23, 1762, daughter of Jean or Janet Read (1728–1762) and Robert Beatson of Kilry, Fife, died in 1839. Portraits of Helena by Katherine Read are in Neil Jeffares's online database (www.pastellists.com): J.612.128 and J.612.132.
35. Frances Burney and Annie Raine Ellis (ed.), *The Early Diary of Frances Burney*, vol. 1, London, George Bell and Sons, 1889, 274.
36. 'Miss Read is a delicate painter; but no very strong expression. She showed us some letters and drawings of her niece, which promise an extraordinary genius: the girl being only ten years of age' (Ralph S. Walker (ed.), *James Beattie's London Diary 1773*, Aberdeen, University Press, 1946, 51, entry dated June 1773).
37. See Jeffares's entrees 'YORKE, Mrs Charles, née Agneta Johnson' and 'BENWELL, Mary, Mrs Robert Codd' in his online *Dictionary of Pastellists before 1800*.
38. Marie-Jo Bonnet, 'Femmes peintres à leur travail: de l'autoportrait comme manifeste politique (XVIIIe – XIXe siècles)', in *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 2002, 49, 140–167. See also Hyde, '"Peinte par elle-même?"'.
39. For instance, by Joan DeJean, Madelyn Gutwirth, and Hugette Krief.

40. On Vigée-Lebrun, see Geneviève Haroche-Bouzinac's biography: *Louise Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun*, Paris, Flammarion, 2011.
41. Steuart, 'Miss Katherine Read, Court Paintress', 41.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 40.
44. In the same way, princes often rewarded faithful diplomats or generals with valuable bejewelled portraits and the like, or prizes attributed by Academies were gold medals rather than the monetary value they represented.
45. Read states this is a secret and mentions that it concerns a portrait for Lord Charlemont, without indicating whether the secrecy concerns the transaction or the commission (Steuart, 'Miss Katherine Read, Court Paintress', 41).
46. Archives Nationales (Paris) O1 1934B. See Xavier Salmon, in *Créer au féminin. Femmes artistes du siècle de Madame Vigée-Lebrun*, Tokyo, Mitsubishi Ichigokan Museum, catalogue entries 15 and 16.
47. Elizabeth Eger and Lucy Peltz, *Brilliant Women. 18th-century Bluestockings*, London, National Portrait Gallery, 2008; Kate Davies, *Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, 28.
48. Several of Read's portraits, including those of Macaulay or Brooke, were engraved during her lifetime.
49. Burney and Ellis (ed.), *The Early Diary of Frances Burney*, vol. 2, 11.
50. Paula Byrne, *Perdita: The Life of Mary Robinson*, London, Harper Collins, 2005, passim.
51. Steuart, 'Miss Katherine Read, Court Paintress', 42.
52. Mary Darby Robinson and Joseph Fitzgerald Molloy (eds.), *Memoirs of Mary Robinson* (1801), Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott Co., 1895, 63–64.
53. Ibid., 64–5.